

FRANCIS F ROSS- VETERAN-WWII-NORTH AFRICA, SICILY, AND EUROPE

By Eric Ross

Francis F. Ross was born in Carbondale, Pennsylvania, on June 7, 1918. He was the eldest son of Nicolas and Genevieve Ross, whose parents had immigrated from Southern Italy around the turn of the century. Francis grew up in the little town just as the Great Depression was sweeping America. He left school at age 15 to work in a grocery store and later, in 1939, in the anthracite coal mines, the leading employer in the region. Mining was hard, dangerous work and safety in those days was often a secondary consideration. His years in the mines, however, taught Francis many valuable lessons including a practical sense of self-reliance, an ability to work with others and the skills to improvise whatever was necessary to get the job done.

The USA's involvement in WWII started with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941. America was caught off guard and it took a while to gear up to the task of war. Although initial enlistments were high, the Selective Service or Draft was instituted to procure enough men to fight in a global war.

Francis Ross was drafted in May, 1942. He said goodbye to his parents and his father saw him off at the train station. He remembers saying something like, "I'll see you for supper". He didn't know that it'd be three years before he saw his parents and home again.

Francis was initially sent to Fort Knox, Kentucky, where he received basic training with the 8th Armored Division. He was later transferred to Fort Bragg, North Carolina and joined the 70th Tank Battalion. The 70th was an independent unit, unattached to a fixed division. Instead, it could be assigned wherever it was most needed. One of the sergeants he first met up with was Dean Purvis, later to become the second most-decorated man in the US Army. Purvis was tough, strict and worked the men hard. Later, this would prove to be valuable, as men in combat needed to trust each other implicitly and to react immediately. Because he could drive a truck and other pieces of heavy equipment, Francis was chosen to be in this tank outfit. He learned to drive all the equipment in the battalion including a half-track and light tank.

America wanted to open a second front against the Axis Powers, Germany and Italy, in Europe as part of the strategy to defeat Hitler first and the Japanese later. A second front would also relieve pressure on the Russians, who in the autumn of 1942, were fighting for their lives on the approaches to Stalingrad. British leadership felt that a cross-Channel invasion of Europe was beyond the capabilities of the Anglo-American forces at that time. Instead the Allies decided to attack the weaker southern flank of the Axis at their bases in Northern Africa. This second front in 1942, would help to divert Axis troops from Russia, secure the Mediterranean, perhaps knock Hitler's Italian Fascist allies out of the war, and defeat Rommel's Afrika Korps and its threat to the vital Suez Canal.

In September 1942, Francis shipped out aboard the *USS Thomas Stone* via Newfoundland to Downpartick, Northern Ireland. There they completed more training, including many long hikes, and awaited orders that would take them to battle. In early November, they re-boarded the *Stone* for a fateful trip to North Africa.

The official story as told by the US Navy is as follows: “The transport was assigned the task of carrying troops for the British-controlled assault on Algiers. She transited the Straits of Gibraltar on the nights of 5 and 6 November. On the morning of the 7th, she was steaming on the left flank of the convoy, second in line. At 0535, a torpedo hit the ship’s port side, aft, blowing a hole in her bottom, breaking her propeller shaft, bending her propeller and rudder to starboard. The convoy continued on, leaving the *Thomas Stone* behind, adrift some 150 miles from Algiers, guarded by the British corvette, *HMS Spry*. After daylight, an inspection of the damage revealed that the ship was in no immediate danger of sinking but was nevertheless unable to move under her own power.

Captain Bennenhof, the ship’s captain, and Major Walter M. Oakes, USA, who commanded the battalion landing team embarked in *Thomas Stone*, were not content to let the transport’s troops drift aimlessly in the Mediterranean. Besides, all on board were in deadly peril from a possible renewal of attack. To solve both problems, the two officers loaded most of the transport’s troops in 24 boats which set out for Algiers Bay under the protection of *Spry*. However, the weather which had been good when the boats left the transport worsened and the frail craft began taking on water. Engine trouble forced the boats to be abandoned and their crews and passengers transferred to the corvette. Later they all landed safely at Algiers.

Meanwhile, Francis and the battalion’s tanks, crews and heavy equipment remained on board the *Stone*. The Navy account continues, “Two Destroyers, *HMS Wishant* and *HMS Velox* arrived and attempted to tow *Thomas Stone*. The next day a tug, *HMS St. Day*, arrived to assist. Despite bad weather and the twisted remains of the transport’s runner which made her all but unmanageable, the group of ships finally arrived at Algiers on the 11th and unloaded her troops and equipment.”

In his book, “*An Army at Dawn-The War in North Africa, 1942-43*”, Richard Atkinson (Henry Holt & Co. NY 2002)., describe the same event as follows, “Hoping to annihilate the Allied Force in the Sicilian Straits, Hitler ordered his available forces, 34 submarines and 76 aircraft to concentrate at the Narrows. “I await a ruthless, victorious attack”, he proclaimed. Too late, the Fuhrer would realize that nearly all of his ambush force had been positioned too far east.

But not all. At Daybreak on Saturday, Nov.7, 1943, the *USS Thomas Stone* was making eleven knots in the left column of ships, thirty-three miles off the Spanish Coast. *Stone* was one of the few American transports in the armada. She carried 1,400 soldiers. An alert officer on the bridge spotted the torpedo wake several hundred yards off the port side. The ship tacked ninety degrees and was nearly parallel to the torpedo’s path when

the blast ripped through her stern, so hard that the sailors on *the USS Samuel Chase*, 600 yards ahead thought they had be struck.

Men already going about their morning duties were flung to the deck and heard the screams of the dying and shouts of the fire brigade heaving ammunition crates over the side. The blast demolished her fantail snapped *Stones'* propeller shaft and killed nine men. Her rudder jammed at hard right, the ship drifted in an arc before stopping dead in the water, 160 miles from Algiers. Two white rockets burst above the ship's superstructure, the signal for "I have been torpedoed". As ordered, other ships in the formation steamed past without slowing.

Francis believed something earlier had happened to the ship, as she was in the front part of the convoy with carriers and escorts and then dropped to the back of the line, in what was called "coffin corner". This was where the subs liked to attack. Francis was in the front of the ship when the torpedo hit, and quickly went up on deck at the warning, "all troops stand by" and "all troops topside to abandon ship." He says two torpedos were fired. The first, a smaller explosion and the second much stronger. The blast killed several men in the back of the boat. Francis ran back there because he wasn't sure where his station was and then turned around, after seeing the smoke and damage. While some accounts aren't clear if it was a submarine or a plane that fired, Francis is certain it was a submarine and saw a British destroyer dropping depth charges. When it was found the *Stone* wasn't sinking, they loaded the infantry men into the ships' small boats and they took off for Algiers. The tank men and their equipment remained on board. Francis and others went below, unpacked and took their machine guns up on deck ready for further action. They drifted all that day. German planes that were looking for them, even dropping flares that night. But their luck held and they weren't found. Another danger was from friendly fire. Two British destroyers sent to rescuer *Stone* found her in the dark. Repeatedly they hailed "Ahoy, is that *the USS Thomas Stone*?" No answer. Francis could hear the British crews getting their guns ready to fire. Finally, Captain Bennedrof answered, "This is the *USS Thomas Stone*." The destroyers tried to pull the *Stone* but the cables snapped. After several tries, they waited for a tug to come and pull them in. They finally arrived in Algiers a few days later. The sturdy *Stone* was grounded at the dock where she later survived a German aerial attack and was eventually converted into a bakery.

Francis had arrived in North Africa. The countries, Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia were under the control of Vichy France, a nominal German ally, since the defeat of France in May, 1940. The French fought the initial Anglo-American invasion in some places bitterly, then quickly capitulated and signed a treaty of alliance and co-operation in Morocco and Algeria. But the Germans reacted swiftly and seized the key area of Tunisia while the British pushed slowly eastward from El Alamein in Egypt. The failure to take Tunisia quickly led to a prolonged fight against Rommel and his Afrika Korps for the control of North Africa.

The Allies, both soldiers and officers, were still green and untested. They were to learn many bitter lessons in Africa. Placed under the command of the French Army,

Company “A” of the 70th, including Francis, set out for Tunisia in December of 1942. They were sent to Pinchon and Fondouk in the very center position of the Allied Front line.

In an interview in the Carbondale News (date) “Francis Ross recalls battle in African desert”, reporter Matt Reavy tells some of the story.

“It was December, 1942. At 6 A.M. the heat was already becoming unbearable. Bleary-eyed and exhausted from driving through the night, Fran struggled to keep his halftrack in line with the rest of the vehicles in the 70th Tanks Battalion’s “A” Company.

The halftrack, with tires in the front and steel tracks in the rear, looked like an odd mating of tank and truck. Five heavy machine guns ringed the vehicle gave it adequate firepower in a fight, but as Fran was finding out, the added weight tended to cause it to bog down in the loose sands.

There were several of these hybrids in Company “A” along with an assortment of trucks and about 18 tanks. Together with a small group of French infantry troops, the vehicles formed a single file line which stretched for more than a quarter mile as the soldiers wound toward their destination- a fortified enemy position more than a day’s travel away.

Before long Fran noticed that the desert terrain was beginning to break up slightly. Small gatherings of bushes began to dot the landscape. Soon he spotted a small group of rocky hills.

As the column crested each dune on its slow ride toward those hills, Fran found he was able to spot a river stretching out in either direction. Evidently, they would have to cross before bedding down. The hill grew large as the column approached. Now they were two dunes away. Fran coaxed his halftrack up the final knoll.

The shots came as the first of the tanks began to cross the river. German artillery units, machine gun nests and mortar crews camouflaged in the hills took out one tank before its crew even knew what happened. The other vehicles scrambled to reach the opposite side where there was safety in the cover of the hills.

In the middle of the column, still on the other side of the knoll, Fran could not see what was happening, but he could tell that it wasn’t good. Quickly his crew took their positions at the gun mounts. The halftrack crested the hill with two others, its two machine guns flaring as the crew fired at the enemy positions.

Fran could see that four tanks had already become mired in or near the river. As his halftrack began to cross the river, a nearby blast nearly tore him out of this seat. The vehicle to his right had been hit.

Like everyone in the 70th Tank Battalion, Fran had been taught the value of trust. He counted on his fellow men and knew they counted on him. Thus, there was really no choice about what to do. He turned back to pick up the crew of the damaged halftrack.

For a moment it looked like he might make it. Then a second blast tore a wide hole in the side of his halftrack. The other halftrack was shot through in the radiator because they didn't put down their armor shield.

The crew was out in an instant and Fran with them. He grabbed a .30 caliber machine gun off its mount and took up a position near the halftrack's right front, which by now had sunk up to its axle. The other driver jumped in Fran's halftrack and attempted to take off but promptly bogged it down in a sand dune.

Fran had noticed that the enemy's shots were landing near his position but never on it. Perhaps they weren't able to get an angle for the right shot.

Fran opened fire. If he could only make them keep their heads down. If he could keep the enemy from moving around he might just be able to keep himself and his men alive. A German bullet struck a crewman in the abdomen, tearing through his ammunition belt. He went down. Fran Ross knew what he had to do. He dove into the line of fire and grabbed his crewman. The bullets sounded, but not in time. Fran yanked the man to cover. Meanwhile the tanks which had already crossed the river took up position at a distance and began firing on the enemy placements. As the stricken crewman was being treated by others, Fran joined fire with the tanks. The .30 caliber flared sending spent casing flying into the air. Keep their heads down, Fran thought, don't let them move.

Others in Company "A" had taken up positions with the French infantrymen and were keeping a steady stream of fire at the enemy. It was a standoff. The allies were able to knock off a few machine gun nests and keep the mortar crew's heads down, but Fran and his men remained pinned down. They would have to wait.

One hour turned to two. Three, Six. The sun crested in the sky and began its long descent toward the west. Seventeen hours passed. The rescue would be difficult even at night. But Fran knew they would come. That was just the way things were. Just before midnight, the tanks came. Fran was ready and helped the wounded on to the tanks while the enemy fired a new barrage on his position. Finally the unit was able to withdraw back down the road they'd come up that morning.

Fran Ross wasn't thinking about medals that day. He just had a job to do and he fought for his country. But when the smoke cleared, his superior officers were thinking differently.

Fran was awarded the Silver Star, the nation's third highest honor for this gallantry at the river crossing that day. The Citation reads:

HEADQUARTERS II CORPS
APO 302 US ARMY

GENERAL ORDERS
Number 45

In the Field
11 July 1943

AWARD OF THE SILVER STAR

Under the provisions of the Army Regulations 600-45, as amended, a Silver Star is awarded to the following individual(s):

FRANCIS F. ROSS, 33057647, Technician Fifth Grade, *****Battalion, for gallantry in action, ** December, 1943, in the vicinity of *****, Tunisia. Technician Fifth Grade Ross aided in evacuating two enlisted men seriously wounded by enemy small arms fire while his organization was making a river crossing. He had remained at the river crossing to help recover six Company vehicles that had mired in the river. While under point blank fire from enemy machine gun, mortar and anti-tank weapons, Technician Fifth Grade Ross, without regard for personal safety, remained at the river crossing until all of the men and all but two of the vehicles were recovered, thus aiding in saving the lives of his comrades and saving the vehicles and supplies of the Company from capture by the enemy. The gallant action of Technician Fifth Grad Ross is an inspiring example for his organization, and is in accordance with the highest traditions of the military service. Home address: Carbondale, Penna. (Model No.35131).

By Command of Lieutenant General BRADLEY:

OFFICIAL:

W.B. Kean
Brigadier General, G.S.G.
Chief of Staff.

F.W. Zies
Lt. Col. A.G.D.
Adjutant General

The Carbondale News for Sept.14, 1943, wrote "Corporal Ross cited for his Gallantry in Tunisia Drive" basically reporting the citation as written and added "Corporal Ross was employed with his father, a miner, at Coalbrook Colliery before entering service, and has been stationed overseas for 16 months. He has a brother, PFC Albert Ross, stationed at Gowen Field, Idaho." Albert was with the 8th Air Force in Italy later in the war.

The next day, Fran went back in the other halftrack which they'd pulled out that night. The river crossing was still dangerous. One of the tanks he was with had a round

put right through it. But Fran was able to salvage some of the equipment from his halftrack before it was buried in the sands.

The war in Africa was difficult, dangerous and confusing. The local population of Arabs was indifferent and sometimes hostile, yet Francis made friends with some of the population including one old man who liked to sit in the halftrack and smoke American cigarettes. The French were hard colonial masters.

In the Allied Armies, in these early days, Command and control were not always clearly delineated. The French and British Armies had different ways of doing things than the American Army. Working together was a learning experience and took time. The enemy had problems too particularly in the area of supply. The Fascist Italian Army was demoralized and often ready to surrender but upon occasion would fight hard. The German Army was superior in some ways to the Allies, including machine guns, the 88mm Artillery piece, new Tiger Mark V tanks and in experience. Rommel's Africa Korps had been fighting for two years in the desert and were now bolstered by the presence of battle-tested veterans from the brutal fighting on the Eastern Front in Russia.

The Germans were also masters of using mines and booby traps. In November the Historical Record of the 70th noted "found automatic pencil "booby trap" 25 yards from kitchen truck". In March, French General Welvert, commander of the French *Constantine Division* to which "A" Company was attached was killed when his jeep ran over a mine.

Sometimes, it was hard to tell friend from foe. One night Francis was bivouaced and suddenly surrounded in the dark by French Colonial Troops, fierce cavalry men called Moroccan Goums. They reached down and felt Fran's warm Italian made sweater. "Macaroni soldier"(Italian), they said. "No, no," said Fran, 'Merican soldier'(American). The Goums collected enemy ears with long knives and were much feared. Fran called to his crewmates, but they jumped into the halftrack, and took off. Some German artillery began to land a short ways off, startling their horses. Fran ran and jumped onto the trailer the halftrack was pulling. The Goums were convinced he was a "Macaroni soldier."

Upon occasion, due to poor air to ground communication and co-ordination, American planes would bomb their own troops. This happened sometimes to the German Army also. But for the Initial period of the war in Africa, the Germans had control of the air. German Stuka Ju-87 Dive Bomber would attack out of the sun at over 300 mph, wailing sirens attached underneath their bellies to demoralize their foes, while they dropped 500lb. Bombs with lethal accuracy. ME-109 Messerschmidt fighters would get right down on the deck , a few feet above the desert floor, and deliver devastating attacks with machine gun and canon fire.

While the Allied Armies struggled to consolidate forces and sort out command problems under General Eisenhower, the German Army, under Rommel, planned to strike before they had a chance to invade Tunisia again. Rommel saw the weakness of the American positions and planned to attack at the juncture of the Allied Forces at Kasserine Pass.

Only the coastal area of Tunisia was flat. The interior of the country was hilly and mountainous. This made for good defensive lines for the Germans and clear lines of approach for any attack. Rommel planned to strike through the mountains from around Sidi bu Zid and Sbeitla through the Kasserine Pass and take the Allied supply bases at Tebessa and Thala. From there he could perhaps push the Allies out of Algeria.

The Allies, American, British and French, were in a relatively poor defensive position. They were posted on hills rather too far apart to be mutually supporting. The valley floors between them were sparsely mined and patrolled.

Rommel sized his chance in early February 1943, and struck with two armored divisions between the hills driving in the outposts and quickly surrounding the isolated hilltop positions. The attack caught the Allies by surprise. Men were killed before they knew what happened. Others were panicked by the sudden onslaught and ran toward the rear in flight. The American shells bounced off the heavy frontal armor of the German Mark IV and Tiger tanks, while the German 75 mm and 88mm cannons pierced the American tanks with devastating effect. The only way for the Americans to stop the German tanks was to hit them in the back, sides or tracks. A tough shot in the confusing heat of combat.

The Americans on the hills were shattered. The Germans fought their way through the Kasserine and seemed on the verge of a major breakout. Here the German Command hesitated for two days in a disagreement between Rommel, his subordinate Von Arnim and between the High Commands in Berlin and Rome. Essentially it was over the direction of the attack and worries about the British 8th Army moving up slowly from the East. A compromise was reached but by then the Allies had dug in and were reinforced in greater strength, after hard fighting the German thrust was stopped. Shortly thereafter, Rommel left Africa, never to return.

The 70th saw action here and at Sbeitla. Fran remembers going back over the mountain there. His halftrack was between two tanks, on top of the hill, Lieutenant Purvis waited in his command tank to provide cover for the men, he wouldn't go until all the men of the 70th were safely over the pass.

General Eisenhower appointed a new commander for the American forces, this was General George Patton. Patton was one of the most famous US Generals to emerge from WWII and certainly one of the most colorful. He was a no-nonsense, tough hard talking, hard fighting General. He was either loved or hated. The men who served under him mostly admired him. He was colorful and profane but he won victories. Even the German Army by 1943 recognized him as probably the best General the Americans had.

Patton reorganized command, got rid of weak or incompetent officers, instilled discipline and most of all a feeling among the troops that the Germans could be beaten and Patton could do it.

Fran saw Patton the first time when he was sent back to Constantine to get some replacement trucks. Patton had instituted a fine for any man caught not wearing a tie. This was part of Patton's idea to instill pride into the troops. Before this, discipline had been rather lax. Patton's efforts to put an "esprit de corps" into the American Army would begin to pay off soon in Africa.

The Germans were tenacious in the fighting in Tunisia, but the tide slowly turned. At Beja, the Germans knocked out several tanks of the 1st Armored Division. But by May/June, 1943, they surrendered giving the Allies control for the area and Southern Coast of the Mediterranean. The 70th was involved in hard fighting around Pinchon, Fondouk and in the Ousseltia Valley. During this battle one of Company "A's tanks was hit and burning. German aircraft came over and bombed the area around the tank, which by that time had been taken by German troops. Needless to say, our men enjoyed that miscalculation very much.

The 70th continued their drive towards Bizerte and Tunis. At Zaghuan in May of 1942, the 70th accepted the surrender of over 7000 German and 1500 Italian troops. The Germans by that time were eager to surrender to the Americans. A single light tank company captured nearly 10,000 enemy troops. It was quite an honor for the men of the 70th. Franklin Anderson, a first lieutenant at the time, told me a little more in detail about this surrender at a 70th reunion in 2003. He says after the Italians had surrendered, he set out in a jeep looking for the Germans. After a while he was pretty far ahead of the lines when he saw a German vehicle with a large white flag. Cautiously, he approached. The Germans wanted to surrender. They only had two conditions. One, they wanted to destroy all their ammunition and heavy weapons. Anderson said fine. It's better that than they shoot it at us. And the German commandant wanted to surrender to the American commandant. . Fine again, said Anderson, and so it was arranged. In all, the Germans lost about 250,000 troops killed, wounded or captured in Tunisia, comparable to their staggering losses at Stalingrad.

Company "A" had done very well in a difficult campaign. They were moved around under the control of different foreign commands including the *Constantine Division*, the *French Legion du Marche*, the *French Foreign Legion*, the *French 19th Division* and the *Group Blinde*. They seldom had adequate supplies and replacements. They had been in the field for 158 consecutive days. The winter and spring weather in Tunisia was cold and wet. Fighting alongside troops speaking different languages and with different military traditions, the men of A Company learned to adapt and learned from early mistakes. The men grew closer together and esprit de corps was higher at the end than at the beginning in Tunisia. The French paid Company "A" the tribute of selecting them for the honor guard in the victory parade in Tunis.

Fran and the 70th then moved back to Tlemcen and later on to Arzew, known as "Mosquito Hill" for its unhealthy environment. Fran took some passes into Algiers and explored its exotic Casbah district. At camp, the men were re-equipped, re-fitted and made ready for the next action.

The Allies were not in agreement over where to attack next. The Americans wanted to go directly at the Germans in Northern Europe, but the British were unconvinced that such an attack was feasible given the strength of the Germans in France and the lack of Allied shipping especially landing craft. So the plan was to attack the weaker Italian forces in Sicily, perhaps knocking Italy out of the war, relieving pressure on the Russians who were fighting huge battles against the Nazis near Kursk and opening up a southern front against the Germans. Churchill, the British Prime Minister, thought that the Mediterranean would be the “soft underbelly of the Axis”. In the event it proved to be a tough and prolonged fight.

SICILY

The 70th Tank Battalion was to operate as a unit for the first time and was attached to the First Infantry Division. The “Big Red One”. Fran was embarked aboard the USS Mexico and landed at Gela Beach on D-day, July 10, 1943.

The invasion itself was carried off but with some heavy losses of C-47 aircraft and glider troops. This was largely due to friendly fire. Fran says the invasion fleet was attacked by German planes. A short while later when the American planes came over, the Navy opened fire on them. Problems between the different service branches in the area of command, control and communications caused casualties. But the main forces of the American 7th Army and the British 8th Army got ashore.

In the American sector, initial German counterattacks on Gela were broken up by small individual groups of soldiers with support of the big guns of the US Navy. The German retreated to strong defensive positions in the rugged mountainous interior of the island. In this terrain, cross-country maneuvers were rarely possible. Once again, it was not suitable tank country, as armor had to stay mainly on the winding roads. This made it easy for retreating Germans artillery to control crossroads, and to blow up bridges, culverts, and important points. The Germans were masters of this type of defense and their delaying tactics caused many killed and wounded Allied soldiers.

Fran remembers moving up into the mountains early in the campaign. Here he saw General Terry Allen, known as a real fighting general. Allen pulled up in a jeep and ordered Fran and his halftrack to follow him after the retreating Germans.

The German, however, were planning a counterattack. Their *Hermann Goering Division*, a tough seasoned outfit was to strike the invasion force with the objective of driving them into the sea. Fran and the 70th moved up through the mountains toward Barrafranca.

At Barrafranca, a strong force of German Mark IV Panther tanks came down the road to attack. Carl Rambo, commander of a tank in the 70th's Company B wrote, “The German tanks stayed on the roads and we ran up into the hills. “B” Company on the left and “A” Company on the right. We would run up to the crest of the hill, fire a shot or

two, back off, then go left or right, run up and fire another shot. We never lost a tank and shot them up pretty good. Nobody even got hit.”

Five German Mark IVs were destroyed by the 70th, another four were stopped and knocked out by artillery. Seven more retreated. Since the Mark IV was far more heavily armored and carried a 75mm gun compared the 37mm gun on American light tanks, victory required quick thinking and superb execution.

The tactic was one that “A” Company developed in Tunisia. Captain Atlee Wampler of the 70th explained, “We found out the hard way that we could fire on German tanks if we attained higher elevation. They could elevate their big guns only so much, and we had to estimate how much higher we had to be. Then we could shoot and run before they could slope their tanks upward to raise their gun elevation. But we had better be right. It took perfect execution and exacting gunnery. If we could hit them in the tracks, we could stop them. Or if we could hit them in the rear, where the engine was vulnerable, we could disable them or knock them out. A shot to the front of the heavy German tanks bounced right off. So we had to be correct in estimating our height advantage and fast and accurate in our firing.”

The Official US Army History, written in 1965, is inaccurate in it’s relating this action. It states only that “the US light tanks lost out” and adds that it was artillery which knocked out all the German tanks.

But the 70th Tank Battalion Official History, written in 1946, much neared the action gives a more complete and accurate account. And Fran agrees with the 70th version saying “I was there, the Army (1965) historian wasn’t.”

This outstanding action was indeed noted and in fact written up in the US Army Newspaper, *Stars and Stripes*, on Aug.7, 1943, written by Staff Sgt. Ralph Martin.

“Light Tanks Outfits Lay ‘em in Pockets”

“...the infantry was pushing forward fast, when suddenly sixteen Mark IVs’ rushed out of the flanking hill in a surprise attack to overrun our infantrymen. Immediately the light tanks raced up to within 1,000 yards of the Mark IVs and let loose at point blank range. When the smoke cleared the Mrks Ivs were seen heading fast in a different direction with five of the number resting quite still , all burnt out and twisted going nowhere.

This tactic isn’t in the books. You don’t throw a light tank armed only with a 37mm cannon and a few machine guns up against a heavily armed Mark IV. Especially not at a 1,000 yard range. It takes guts plenty. But these tankmen know what the odds are on occasions they have even stood up to the giant Mark Vs and they have gone in and knocked out German 88mm guns too...”

General Terry Allen wrote:

HEADQUARTERS
1ST INFANTRY DIVISION

To: C.O. 70th Tank Bn.(L)

5 August'43

Upon your relief from attachment to the Division (1st), and on passing from our direct control, I wish to thank you personally and in the name of the 1st Infantry Division for the loyal cooperation of the 70th Tank Battalion (L) during the Sicilian Campaign. The actions of the battle of Barrafranca (when the Mark IVs came out of the hill on the flank to cut down the Infantry), East of Caltanissetta, at Enna, at Alimena and at Bompietro were fine examples of the intimate relationship that existed between the Division and your Battalion. They were also a tribute to your leadership and to the courage and combat efficiency of your men, without whose assistance our common task would have been infinitely more difficult. With every good wishes for the future and hope that you will again be with us when the going is tough, I remain,

Most Sincerely,

/s/ Terry Allen
Major General US Army
Commanding

After the Germans retreated the 70th pushed on into Barrafranca. Another of the American Generals there was Teddy Roosevelt Jr. , who was much admired by the men. George Brookstein, 'A' Company liaison corporal, tells that "I saw some of our infantry panicked at Barrafranca. Then I saw General Roosevelt with his cane chasing them all back to the line." Fran had seen this General in North Africa many times.

The 70th continued the push on to Nicosia and Troina. The Germans fought hard to hold ground and the mountain defenses were difficult to break. Sicily was mainly mountainous and well suited to the type of tenacious defense the Germans were skilled at. They destroyed bridges over rivers and ravines, mined mountain passes and zeroed in their 88's on crossroads and other bottlenecks. They delayed the Allied advance as long as possible. A small group of men, machine guns and artillery could stall an entire regiment. The terrain in Sicily was too mountainous for large scale tank operations. That is no doubt the reason that the 70th Light Tanks were chosen for the role of infantry support.

Once while moving through the mountains, German artillery blew out the road in front. With two tanks ahead and two behind, Fran attempted to maneuver his half-track. The Germans had them zeroed in however, and one shell caved in the side of his half-track before they were able to withdraw.

Close calls were common in Sicily. Once several German planes came over and strafed some jeep right in front of Fran's halftrack. Almost immediately after the German planes came some American planes, US ground forces opened up on them and shot down some of our own planes. Another time, General Omar Bradley called in an air strike on the German front lines but the planes dropped their bombs on the 70th instead. Men dove into ditches and ran for cover in the confusion. This incident occurred near Bompietro.

In Sicily, the Italian people saw the US Army as liberators not as conquerors. The Italian Army by this stage of the war had become quite demoralized and wanted to get out of it. Although they were occasionally able to put up a stiff resistance, especially when backed by German troops, in general they were ready to surrender. Their leadership and equipment was poor. Some of their officers ran away at the first sign of trouble, leaving the men to fend for themselves. The Italian tanks were no match for the American or British armor. And they had very limited and inferior supplies of weapons and ammunition.

In the early 1960's I was going to buy a vintage WWII Italian carbine for hunting. The salesman strongly advised against it. They were poorly made and the bolts were defective. After firing a few rounds, the bolts were liable to blow straight back in the shooter's face, maiming or perhaps killing him.

The Italians got rid of Mussolini on the 25th of July, but the Allies missed their chance as the Germans took over the country and prepared a stiff defense of the territory of their former allies. They were well-trained and led by General Albert Kesselring. They put off a skillful fighting withdrawal in both Sicily and Italy. Most of the troops in Sicily got away to the Italian mainland with a lot of their equipment. There they continued to harass the Allied advance. The Germans had the new heavy Tiger tanks, built to fight the Russian KV and T-34 tanks, which were larger than any American tanks. Their 88mm dual purpose cannon, which caused many casualties in Africa, was again employed in Sicily. It has been called the best gun of any army in WWII. They also had "*Nebelwerfers*", a multiple barreled rocket launcher. Called the "*Screaming Mimmies*" by the Americans, they sounded like railroad boxcars coming through the sky. Psychologically, they were frightful but experienced troops soon learned they were not that accurate and therefore not as dangerous.

The 70th took the important central town of Caltanissetta in a surprise night attack, a rare occurrence in this campaign. "A" Company and Fran were held in reserve and entered the town in the morning. They were also involved in tough fights for Bompietro, Mistralia and Petralia. The Allied effort in Sicily was led by General Patton and British General Montgomery. The British ran into heavy resistance and were slow to advance so Patton took the lead in attacking Western Sicily. Fran didn't care much for Montgomery, he felt he was a "prima donna" and overly cautious, allowing the Germans time to escape. Many post-war critics have felt the same way. In Montgomery's defense, the British Army had been bled white in WWI with senseless attacks and Montgomery didn't wish to repeat those fiascos. Nor did he have the resources of men and materials

that the US Army had. He would only attack when he had everything in place to overwhelm the enemy. Often by that time the Germans would be able to deftly withdraw and escape.

This was the case in Sicily where the Germans under General Hube were able to escape from Messina with much of their equipment to fight again in the bitter protracted campaign in Italy. The American under Patton were actually first into Messina ahead of the British, just a little behind the fleeing Germans.

Despite the escape of the Germans, Sicily was an important victory for the Allies. They had knocked one of the three Axis powers out of the war. They had learned several important lessons on amphibious, mountain and armored war, including the co-ordination of different services army, navy and air force and defeated the best the German Army had.

For Fran however, the end of the fighting after 38 days, brought some relief. The 70th was bivouacked by the sea near Termini Imerese. He was able to visit Palermo and see some of the sights in this historic city in a horse drawn wagon. Everyone expected that they would be in on the invasion of Italy. But they left behind their light tanks and all of their heavy equipment and boarded the *USS Monterey* for England.

ENGLAND

The 70th in England was stationed at several different locations including Swindon, Winchester and Barton Stacy. While there, they received new M-4 Sherman Medium tanks. One company kept light tanks while the other three became medium tank companies. Fran was reassigned to "D" company and became the driver of a T-2 Tank Retriever, a large vehicle with a crane and gear for towing disabled tanks and armed with a 75mm cannon and machine guns. The men received extensive training for the invasion of Europe including making their tanks amphibious, and in using bulldozer tanks to open up the seawalls on the coast of France. The 70th history also records attempts at developing a rocket firing tank, but the 75mm cannon proved to be more accurate and effective. Fran trained at Slapton Sands which a little later on was the site of a serious mishap. A training landing exercise was attacked by German torpedo boats which got in among the landing craft and killed and wounded over a thousand men. This incident was covered up for a long time by Allied command as they didn't want to give away information to the enemy. However, the training lessons here proved valuable in the real invasion.

Wartime England was a rather grim place. The British were fighting the Germans since 1939 and there were many shortages of everyday items. The Americans had an abundance of supplies which they generously shared with the British people. In 1943-44, England was still under the “blitz”, nightly German air-raids by planes and more ominously by V-1 and V-2 Rockets. These were Hitler’s so called “vengeance weapons”. They were not effective strategically but instead were terror weapons aimed at killing and frightening the population. But the British stood firm.

While London was under attack, many people tried to avoid the city. Fran, however, took advantage of the opportunity to get passes and often went into London. Once while there with his hometown friend, Amos Alieo, the Germans heavily bombed the area around Paddington Station.

Most of the time in England however was spent on training including several long hikes to get the men in shape for the big invasion to liberate Europe.

D-DAY AND NORMANDY

Fran’s ship left Dartmouth and joined the great armada leaving for France on June 4, 1944. A huge storm blew up in the English Channel and the invasion was postponed. They went back to port to await better weather. Many of the troops were seasick the whole time. Fran says he only got seasick after eating some canned pears. He wasn’t afraid of the landing, in fact he couldn’t wait to get off the boat, that’s how rough it was. On June 5, they got the word to launch again.

He says that they passed the battleships at about 18 miles out. They were firing broadsides from their huge guns. A little closer in were the cruisers and destroyers. As at Sicily, the naval gunfire had a great effect both on the German emplacements and on Allied morale.

Their old nemesis, General Rommel, was in charge of defenses on Hitler’s West Wall fortifications. He was short of men and material, but he did everything in his power to make the defenses strong. He had large guns in concrete bunkers, machine gun nests, and the Germans planted thousands of mines, laid underwater obstacles and flooded vast areas inland to create lanes of fire. His idea was to stop the invasion on the beaches. Here he clashed with his superior General von Rundstedt who wanted to let the Allies get ashore and then crush them in a counterattack. Hitler as usual prevaricated and unable to decide, left the matter unsettled. But He held for himself the reserves to launch any counterattack.

As Fran approached Utah Beach in the first wave, he saw a large mine just along side. His LST missed it but another boat wasn’t as lucky. Sargeant Glenn Gibson’s boat hit the mine which exploded and blew up his vessel about 5,000 yards offshore. Four tanks and all the personnel were thrown into the sea. The forward section of the craft sank but the stern half was still afloat. He swam to it and climbed aboard. He attempted to disentangle a Navy enlisted man who was injured and caught in the door of the pilot’s

compartment. The LCT capsized, taking the Navy man with it but throwing Gibson into the sea for a second time. He climbed upon a portion of the wreckage and was taken aboard another ship about twenty minutes later. Gibson and two sailors were the only survivors. Gibson's watch stopped at the exact moment they hit the mine. He later donated this watch to the D-Day Museum in France.

Franklin Anderson was landed on H-hour –15 minutes. He was one of the first to land on Utah Beach. He went in with a couple of squads carrying Bangalore torpedoes, long poles with explosives attached to the end, for blowing holes in the seawall. Anderson got in ok, and set about opening the causeways for the tanks to enter.

Fran remembers seeing a beachmaster standing in the water waving them to one side. He was standing on a ledge. The water was still deep here, if they got off too soon, the tank would sink to the bottom and not come up. If this man didn't wave them in the right direction, they might have landed down on Omaha Beach where the German defenses were strongest and which was a near disaster for the Americans. Instead Fran landed a little to the left of the intended target "Utah Green Beach", but actually in a better spot to move rapidly inland. A couple of big guns were firing at them from up the beach and a few German planes roared overhead. But the Allies soon gained air superiority. And the big German guns were quickly eliminated. This time, unlike Sicily, Allied planes had large white stripes painted on them, to eliminate confusion and friendly fire, and Allied vehicles had a big white star in a white circle to help in visual recognition. Radio communications and fire control had improved also.

Fran and his crew quickly removed the heavy water-proofing shroud from the retriever and started moving up to support the US 101st paratroopers who were fighting to take the village of St. Mere Eglise. The paratroops had a rough landing in the early morning hours of June 6. Not all of the paratroopers were lucky, some were hit in the planes, others on the way down, and most were scattered far and wide across the entire Normandy peninsula. This fact confused the Germans who thought there were paratroop landings as far away as the Seine. While the paratroopers were able to hold their own against enemy pressure, they encountered great difficulty in consolidating and making contact with each other.

Fran was off the beach by 8:00 in the morning, and moved ahead linking up with the paratroops in St. Mere Eglise. Jack Lovell, a tank driver, in Co.'D', remembers seeing many chutes with dead paratroopers in them on both sides of the road leading into St. Mere Eglise. Fran remembers seeing a chute draped there on the steeple of the church. The fellow was still alive and today there is a monument in St. Mere Eglise to him. the first village in France to be liberated from the Nazis. By nightfall the 'D' Company of the 70th was in position to protect the SW flank of the 4th Infantry Division. The 70th paid a high price on Utah Beach that day, 21 men were killed, most when the LST hit the mine on the approach. Several others were wounded including Captain Ahearn, who lost both legs, when he stepped on a mine attempting to rescue two infantrymen. Lt. Walter Anderson, who wanted Fran to be his tank driver, was killed 2 days after D-day, when a German mortar round landed directly on the turret of his tank.

The 70th moved inland in the days following. Fran went through Montebourg, Valognes and north in the drive to Cherbourg. They immediately encountered hard fighting in the so-called “hedgerow country”. This area of Normandy had been walled for centuries by thick earth and hedges sometimes 12 –15 feet high and 3 feet thick. It aided the stubborn German resistance. They would ambush infantry and tanks in the narrow lanes and thick bushes. They were difficult to get at and had to be dug out one field at a time. The Cotentin peninsula was not good tank country and once again the Germans had the advantage in defensive terrain.

The Allies needed to capture a major port to bring in their supplies. General Bradley decided to go for Cherbourg. The Germans put up a costly and effective resistance. The port was only captured weeks later and by then the enemy had totally devastated the port and landing facilities.

A method of cutting through the thick hedgerows was devised by a US Army Sargent. He took Rommel’s iron beach obstacles and cut and welded them on to the front of the Sherman tanks. That way they could plow through the fields without exposing their undersides to the German traps and “Panzerfaust” anti-tank weapons. General Bradley quickly ordered these iron clippers fitted onto all necessary US Tanks.

Even so, the fighting in the hedgerow country was costly and time consuming. The British under Montgomery wasn’t able to take the crucial crossroads town of Caen and so the Allies were stalled in Normandy until General Patton was able to make an end run around the German defenses at Avaranches and Coutances. The Germans fought hard here and especially at Mortain, Falaise and St. Lo.

Although Patton made the end run, it was the 4th Infantry and the 70th Tank Battalion which blasted open Avaranches so that Patton could sweep through. Fran said in the fighting around Carentan, he was in a column of tanks a bit behind the others. They heard him firing his machine guns all the way up the line. When asked what he was shooting at, Fran said, “anything that moved.” The Germans were infiltrating all along the line and he wasn’t taking any chances.

Fran remembers well the bombing of St. Lo. He saw General Leslie McNair, one of the Army’s top young generals heading up to the front that morning. Mc Nair was killed when the carpet bombing crept back over allied lines. Due to the heavy smoke cover, the bombers released early over our own troops. Many Americans were killed but the damage to the Germans was even greater and the breakout of Normandy continued. Fran recalled the battles around Falaise and the Mortain pocket as some of the toughest fighting in the war. The Germans were trying to break out and escape and so were fighting desperately to the last.

Once they had broken out into open country, General Patton and the US Armored Forces swiftly advanced through France. The Germans seemed intent only upon getting away back to the Reich.

The Allied armies raced across France. They were soon at the gates of Paris. There the 70th was halted for two days while the French 1st Division under General LeClerc had the honor of “liberating” Paris. In the event, they couldn’t take it so the 70th was actually among the very first troops to enter the city. Afterwards they were pulled back so the French could have the prestige of entering Paris “first”.

Company “D” set up in a vacant lot on the outskirts of Paris. Here they quickly made many friends with the local population. (story)

From Paris, the 70th moved directly out to Reims and then to the German border which was heavily fortified and known as the “Siegfried Line”. Here, after penetrating outer layer of the German defense. They were forced to hold up, due to lack of supplies. (Market Garden) Along the way, through France, tragically, more good men of the 70th were killed and wounded, but worse lay ahead.

The 70th chased the Germans back but were unable to move much further due to supply shortages, especially gasoline. This gave the Germans time to dig in and plan for another offensive. The 70th meanwhile was ordered to move into and take an area known as the Huertgen Forest. This was one of the bloodiest and least necessary battles of the entire war. The plan was to move quickly through the forest and capture the Roer Dams. But the Germans had entrenched and fortified the dense woods and made it a killing zone. Several American Divisions, including the 28th Infantry Division of Pennsylvania were severely mauled in the Huertgen. One reporter called the fighting the “Passendale with tree bursts”. He meant that it resembled the bloody World War 1 tragedy in Flanders but with the added danger of artillery rounds fired into the tree creating a lethal shower of splinters. The whole woods could have been by-passed, but command wanted to move forward on an even line.

The Huertgen Forest, part of the Reichswald Forest, was a dense woods, wet and muddy with narrow tracks and few open areas. Not good tank country at all. The Germans had concrete bunkers, interlocking fields of fire and well sited artillery. The tanks could only stick to the tracks where they were easy targets. Fran recalls the Huertgen Forest as a spooky place with sudden death and danger all around. He said it was the hardest fighting of the war. And it was prolonged. The 70th was in the action there continuously for over six weeks. Once Fran was under artillery fire for seventeen straight hours. Another time an artillery shell landed nearly on top of them. It was a dud. “If it wasn’t”, said Fran, “I wouldn’t be here today.” In Africa, when German shells were duds, the French would say “Fabrique in Paris”. This meant that they were made by slave laborers in Paris and were sabotaged. Perhaps this bomb too was “fabrique in Paris” or sabotaged in one or another of the many slave labor camps ran by the Nazis. The fighting there continued on until just before the “Battle of the Bulge”. Afterwards at reunions of the 4th, 9th and 28th Divisions, the survivors always mentioned the Huertgen Forest as the mark against which all other battles were measured.

In early December, the 70th were finally relieved and pulled back through the Belgian towns of St. Vith, Malmedy and Bastogne, towns soon to become famous. Company “D” was assigned to guard towers of Radio Luxembourg in Junglingster, Luxembourg. They were there just in time for the last massive German offensive in the West in World War II, called the “Battle of the Bulge”.

Hitler, the gambler, decided to risk all on a last throw of the dice, he stripped his defenses in the east against the onrushing Soviets and sent the remains of this Army west to the Ardennes, where he had opened the war in 1940 surprising the French and British and winning his biggest victory. He planned to cut through to Antwerp, split the Allied lines and win the war in the west, then turn on the Russians.

The Germans attacked early in December. They achieved tactical surprise as the Allies were unaware of the German build-up. They also hit the Allies in a part of the line that was weakly held, being defended by green and untested troops. They quickly overran the initial line and broke in at several places. Fran remembers the Germans also tried to come through Luxembourg, but were stopped cold by the Americans. Thereafter, the Germans were content to hold on the southern shoulder of the “bulge” and let their troops further north drive on.

Fran remembers it was cold and foggy. Allied planes couldn’t fly. The Germans tried to infiltrate in his sector but were driven back. They were then attached to Patton’s Third Army and moved in for the relief of Bastogne. There was deep snow and hard fighting but Bastogne and the 101st Airborne were saved.

After the battle of the Bulge, there was still more hard fighting to be done. Prum, Bitburg and Wurzburg were all captured by the 70th and although the end was in sight, the Nazis continued to fight with desperation. Wurzburg, Dresden and other German cities which had been spared so far were bombed to pieces. The citizens of Wurzburg remember and some still resent the Allies blasting their historic old town to ruins. But, the Nazis were fighting hard and would not surrender. These bombings may have been gratuitous but the commanders felt they were necessary to save lives in the long run. In the last five months of the war in Europe, more Americans had to die to liberate Europe.

Fran remembers once near the end of the war, he went into a cellar, looking for souvenirs. This time he didn’t bring his tommy-gun, which he always carried. As he went into the cellar, he found four live Germans. Fran slapped his side, but he didn’t have his pistol. It could have been a tense moment, but these Germans were anxious to surrender. Fran brought them back in safely.

Fran ended up the war near Wurzburg, and Bamberg. He had to wait a little while to be demobilized and sent home. He went from Bamberg to Nurnberg and by train to Thionville in France. There he waited until boarding a B-17 bomber for a flight to Casablanca. The plane was pretty beat up with sandbags still on the floor from its bombing runs. Fran’s luck held as a couple of the earlier B-17 runs had crashed on the way killing all aboard. In Casablanca he had a good time for a few days, until finally

boarding a C-54 Skymaster to Miami via the Azores and Bermuda. Then he took a train to Scranton, Pa, where he caught the last bus that night back home to Carbondale and his family, whom he hadn't seen in three long years.

In the course of the war, the 70th had 184 killed in action with 709 purple hearts issued. Yet the men of the 70th went on, many of them, like Fran, through eight major campaigns. The 70th was at the center of events in WWII. They were there when the first shots were fired in North African and went the last shots were fired in 1945. The men of the 70th had done all they were asked and more.

Fran went back into the army as a reservist in the National Guard in 1950. He joined the 28th Infantry Division. They were mobilized during the Korean War, and Fran and the 28th were again sent to Germany, this time to guard against a possible Russian threat. He was stationed near Augsburg. Duty in Germany was relatively easy after his service in WWII. The biggest danger he faced was back in the states, before he was shipped out overseas. He was involved in a huge train wreck involving a troop train and the express train, "The Spirit of St. Louis". Due to missed signals, the express rammed into the rear of the troop train killing several men from the Wilkes-Barre, Pa, area. But Fran's luck held as he was in the mid section of the troop train. His experience and training again paid off as he helped evacuate the wounded and injured soldiers maintaining a calming and reassuring presence.

Fran married Betty Briedenstein in 1947. They have two sons, Francis Eric and Ronald F and two grandchildren, Steven C. and David W. Ross. Following his service, Fran worked several different jobs after the mines shut down in the mid-1950s. He moved to Johnson City, NY, in 1962, worked for General Electric Company. He moved back to Simpson, Pa, in 1967, where he lives today. He retired in 1988. He has since kept active and in touch with many of his old friends. On March 24, 2012, he was honored by the 109th Infantry Regiment of Pennsylvania as a distinguished alumnus.

On May 8, 2007, for his services in WWII, Francis was officially awarded Chevalier of the French Legion of Honor, France's highest military order. Francis served with the French in North Africa, Normandy, the liberation of Paris and through to the Rhineland. In a moving official ceremony at the French Consulate in New York the medal was pinned on Francis by the Consul General Mr. Edward LeMette under the direction of former French president Jacques Chirac.

The award letter says in part, "this award underlines the deep appreciation and gratitude of the French people for your contribution to the liberation of our country during WWII. We will never forget the commitment of American heroes like you to whom France owes so much. Mr. Ross' record in the war was outstanding."